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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role played by the adoption of a stringent admissions policy in the rapid transition of a large, open-door, senior college located in a metropolitan area in the South into an institution with elitist aspirations. The discussion focuses on the impact admission policy had on institutional characteristics and its effect on the institution's educational philosophy, entering students' academic ability levels, and the institution's public image. Following World War II, the college followed an open-door admission policy and offered a cafeteria curriculum; initial coursework was often remedial because many students had not completed high school and were admitted under special circumstances. The move to selective admissions was the outcome of various changes in the college's, city's, state's, and nation's expectations for higher education. After implementation of the selective admissions policy, IQs of entering freshmen were closer to those of freshmen entering other institutions; more entering freshmen were women; and more students were enrolling in arts and sciences rather than business. The changed policy also resulted in drastic reductions in freshman enrollment and increases in student holding power. Faculty were receptive to selective admissions, and public image was considerably enhanced. The paper concludes that selective admissions alone is not the solution to problems confronting higher education. (Contains 10 references.) (SM)

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# CHANGES IN INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS AS A FUNCTION OF SELECTIVE ADMISSIONS

by

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## Changes in Institutional Characteristics as a Function of Selective Admissions

In the 1950s an increasing demand for college education turned the attention of college officials to selective admission as a means of coping with increased applications. The opinion was frequently voiced that colleges had no choice in the matter but should select applicants on the basis of their potential for successful completion of degree requirements. Concurrent with the opinion that colleges must be selective because of the admissions burden was the belief that colleges ought to be selective because it is unfair to students to permit them to enter when the probability of their early dismissal is high. Whether selective admissions or an open-door policy is desirable or not is a matter of educational philosophy. Whether selective admissions is necessary is a question lending itself more easily to empirical analysis.

The impact of a selective admissions policy on institutional characteristics is a subject little examined by those concerned with either admissions problems or selection techniques. Unfortunately, both groups focus too closely on the problems and techniques of selective admissions without taking up the larger issue of what the establishment of a selective admissions program will do to other factors and variables within the institutional setting. That selective admissions can radically affect an institution's reputation or image is more or less assumed, but the relationship between selective admissions and institutional characteristics is not crystal-clear.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of a stringent admissions policy in the rapid transition of an open-door urban institution to an institution with elitist aspirations, if not actual accomplishment. An effort has been made to look at the impact of admissions policy, in so far as it can be determined,

upon institutional characteristics when a concerted effort is made to change rapidly the: (1) educational philosophy under which an institution has been operating, (2) the level of academic ability evidenced by students entering the institution, (3) the public image of the institution in the community it serves.

### Before Selective Admissions

The subject of this paper was a senior college located in a large metropolitan area in the South. With the great majority of its growth attributable to the G.I. Bill and the increased demand for postsecondary education immediately following World War II, the college maintained an open-door admissions policy and offered a cafeteria curriculum. Applicants who had not completed high school were admitted as "adult", "special", or "irregular" students. Later they were permitted to take the General Education Development Tests and admitted as a "regular" student if they passed the tests at the level required by the State Department of Education for a high school equivalency certificate. Veterans were permitted to take the "college level" GED tests and by making satisfactory scores on all four tests could be exempted from as much as 50 hours of lower division academic work.

The curriculum of the college consisted primarily of course work with an "immediate cash value" in the community served by the college. Numerous diplomas were awarded for one or two years' work in a diversity of business or commercial fields. Innumerable short courses, training seminars, and special programs of all stripes were offered to persons unable to enroll for a full quarter's work. Even those who did enroll for a full quarter frequently took a single course which was immediately applicable in the business world. Although authorized to confer the Bachelor of Commercial Science degree (and later the Bachelor of Business Administration degree), the college did not require a large auditorium for graduation exercises. To meet the needs of those students seeking some form of a liberal education, the college arrived at the remarkable solution of offering the Bachelor of Commercial Science degree with a major in social sciences.

As would be expected, much of the initial work offered those seeking academic credit was of a remedial nature. For a decade or more the college experimented with various forms of remedial coursework in English, mathematics, and reading. An effort was made to provide such assistance as the student might need, and if there was at any time in American education a truly student-centered philosophy of education, one seemed to be in operation at this particular institution for the ten years following World War II. Although grading standards varied immensely from instructor to instructor and from department to department, there was throughout the ten years a gradual tightening of academic standards.

Because of the nature and location of the college, most of the coursework was offered during the evening. Indeed, the college was not initially authorized to offer daylight instruction but did so through the device of extending the evening through the afternoon to 1:00 p.m. and eventually to 9:00 a.m. Enrollment figures for the early years following World War II are not distinguished by accuracy. Because of the large number of students taking only one course, and because of the large number of students who enrolled and almost immediately withdrew, accurate enrollment figures on either a full-time equivalent or head count basis are unavailable.

## The Initiation of Selective Admissions

The establishment of a selective admissions program at the college was the outcome of a series of changes in the college, the city and the state, and the nation's expectations for higher education. In 1957, the president of the college who had nursed the institution through the recession, kept it alive during the war, and fostered its rapid expansion of enrollment with G.I.'s, retired and a new president was appointed. Other events in 1957 which are *not* unrelated was the launching of the Russian sputnik and the ensuing national dialogue about excellence.

In the winter quarter of 1959 all admissions at the college, with the exception of a few transfer students, were closed down,

and a radical shift in admissions policies effected. All adult or community education was discontinued; all short courses, training seminars, and other non-academic programs were stopped; so were all diploma or nondegree programs; hereafter the college was to admit only students seeking a four-year degree. A trial run of the admissions program was made in the summer of 1959, and the program put into full force for the fall quarter of that year.

The admissions program established for the selection of new students was extensive, time-consuming, and expensive. In addition to College Board SAT scores and a high school transcript, all entering freshman applicants were required to take educational achievement tests in English, mathematics, natural science, and social studies (the following year a reading test was added to the battery of admissions tests). If satisfactory scores on the tests were made, the applicant was then "invited" to an interview with three faculty members. After interviewing the applicant for approximately ten minutes, the faculty members individually recommended his rejection or his acceptance, and the chairman of the interview team wrote a brief but global evaluation of the applicant's potential for academic success. After the applicant's "dossier" was thus complete, the director of admissions then made the final decision concerning the applicant's rejection or acceptance. If rejected, the applicant could, of course, appeal the decision. With the exception of SAT scores and high school averages, transfer students underwent the same admissions process.

Not the least of the requirements for admissions was the requirement that the applicant present two academic credits more than other colleges in the state then required. Also not the least of the requirements involved in the selective admissions program was that by the very nature of the selective admissions program, the applicant was required to visit the college on at least two separate occasions and usually three. He was required to make his application in sequence, sometimes being required to wait a

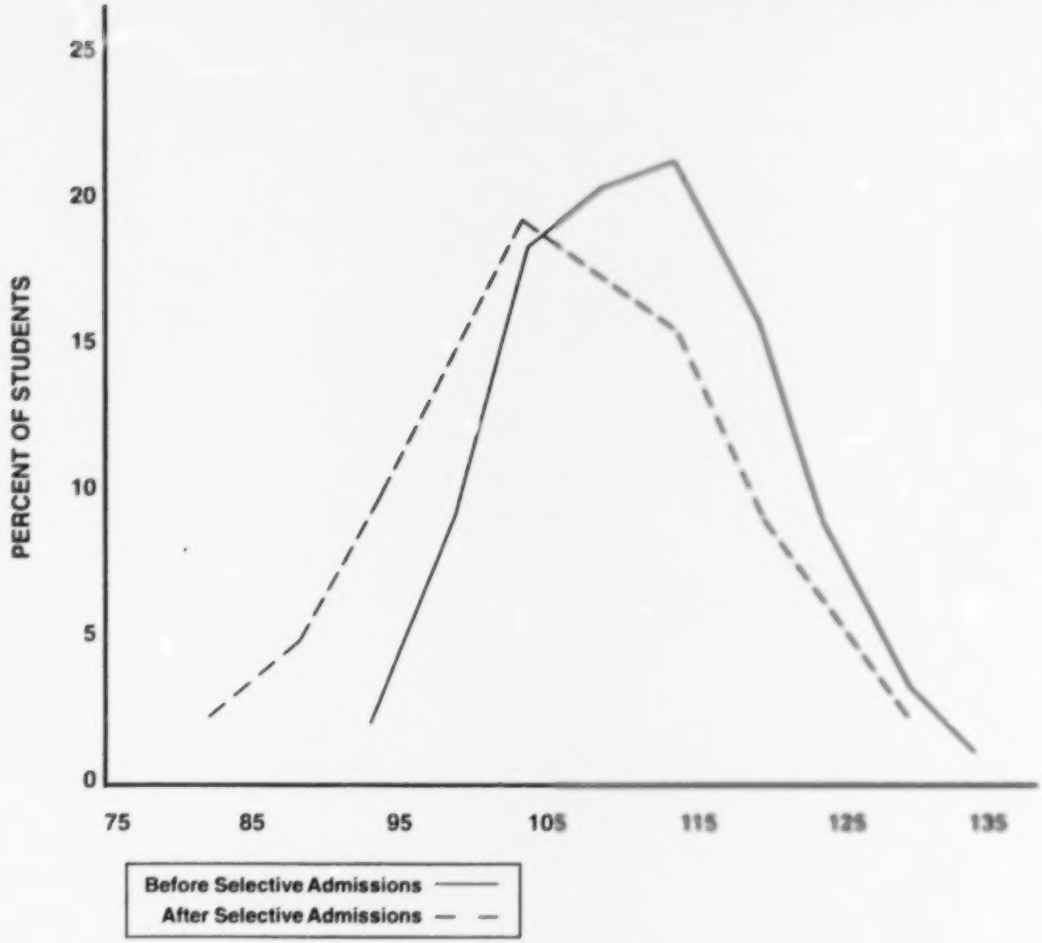
considerable period of time between steps, but usually completing the admissions process, if all went smoothly, in about three weeks. Some faculty members at the college expressed the view that this must surely test the applicant's persistence; others thought it tested his sincerity about desiring a college education.

### Qualitative Shifts in Academic Ability

Because the Otis Quick-Scoring Test of Mental Ability (the Otis Gamma) had been used in previous years for testing entering freshmen after they were enrolled, it was deemed desirable to include it in the battery administered to applicants, both at the entering freshman level and at the transfer level. A comparison of Otis I.Q. scores for entering freshmen who were admitted during the years 1952-54 has been made in Figure 1, with the scores for entering freshmen who were admitted during the years 1959-62, the first three academic years that the selective admissions program was in operation.

The overlapping distributions of Otis I.Q. scores show a substantial but not dramatic shift upward on the scale. The mean I.Q. for entering freshmen prior to selective admissions was 105.5, with a standard deviation of 10.2; the mean I.Q. for entering freshmen who had undergone the selective admissions program was 111.8, with a standard deviation of 8.5 points. The implications of the comparison, therefore, is that the entering freshmen who had been selectively admitted were somewhat better prepared for college work — in so far as the Otis Gamma measures such preparation — than their predecessors but they were not a great deal more homogeneous. The most significant aspects of the two distributions is not so much the increase in mean performance or the slight decrease in variation as it is the shift of the bulk of students from an I.Q. range of 95 to 110 to a range of 100 to 120. Whereas the entering freshmen admitted under an open-door policy were more similar in general intelligence to the general population, the selectively admitted freshmen were more similar to freshmen admitted to other institutions in the nation.

**Figure 1. Comparison of Otis IQ Scores for Entering Freshmen Before and After Initiation of Selective Admissions.**




Perhaps a better comparison of "before and after" measures of academic ability can be gained from Table 1. There the SAT scores and high school averages were shown for two years prior to selective admissions and for four years following the initiation of the selective admissions program. As will be noted, neither the gains in measured academic ability nor the increase in high school averages are dramatic, considering the rigidity of

**Table 1. Distribution of CEEB Scholastic Aptitude Test Scores and High School Averages for Entering Freshmen Over a Six Year Period**

| | *Percent of Entering Freshmen:* | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1957 | 1958 | 1959 | 1960 | 1961 | 1962 |
| SAT - Verbal | | | | | | |
| 600 - 699 | 1 | 2 | 2 | 6 | 7 | 4 |
| 500 - 599 | 8 | 8 | 14 | 21 | 25 | 25 |
| 400 - 499 | 24 | 28 | 35 | 41 | 49 | 46 |
| 300 - 399 | 40 | 46 | 46 | 30 | 19 | 25 |
| 200 - 299 | 27 | 16 | 3 | 2 | | |
| SAT - Math | | | | | | |
| 600 - 699 | | 1 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 4 |
| 500 - 599 | 9 | 10 | 12 | 20 | 26 | 26 |
| 400 - 499 | 31 | 36 | 43 | 46 | 52 | 46 |
| 300 - 399 | 44 | 45 | 39 | 29 | 20 | 24 |
| 200 - 299 | 16 | 8 | 3 | 2 | | |
| High School Average | | | | | | |
| A | 12 | 14 | 14 | 26 | 20 | 17 |
| B | 35 | 42 | 43 | 52 | 55 | 56 |
| C | 53 | 44 | 43 | 22 | 25 | 27 |
| NUMBER | 544[2] | 713 | 254 | 306 | 294 | 396 |

1. All data given are for Fall Quarters
2. 192 excluded because of incomplete data
3. The average Otis Intelligence Quotient during this period was raised from 105 to 113.

SOURCE: "Changes in Institutional Characteristics as a Function of Selective Admissions." In Clarence H. Bagley (Ed.), *Research on Academic Input.* Proceedings of Sixth Annual Forum of the Association for Institutional Research (May 2-5, 1966).

the selective admissions process. While a rise in mean performance is readily detectable, the significance of the data is to be found in the exclusion of students in the lower brackets of verbal and mathematical ability and the somewhat gradual reduction of "C" average students admitted to the college. It is well to note, however, that the selective admissions program did not

immediately place a larger proportion of entering freshmen in the upper brackets of verbal and mathematical ability. Instead, the selective admissions program was in effect for two years before an actual gain at the upper levels (above 500) is in any way impressive. The failure to select a larger proportion of "A" average students over the six year period may be attributed to either "floating" standards in the high schools or to the attraction of students from different high schools.

### Changes in Institutional Characteristics

The changes in admissions policies came at a time when numerous other policy and program changes were underway at the college. In 1957, both the Bachelor of Arts degree and the Bachelor of Science degree was authorized with majors in several fields. The School of Business was authorized to confer the Master of Business Administration degree and expanded greatly the scope of its offerings at the undergraduate level. In both the School of Business and the College of Arts and Sciences a major emphasis was placed on the raising of academic standards.

The expansion of the college's academic programs into the fields of arts and sciences and into the graduate level was a highly significant factor in changing both the institution's role and its image. Whereas previously the great majority of the students had been enrolled in business courses, the majority by 1960 enrolled in arts and sciences. And whereas the majority of students had been full-time employees who attended evening classes, the majority now became full-time students who moved directly from high school to enrollment in day classes. And whereas the majority of students had been men because of the limited offerings to women, the majority of entering freshmen were now women. Concurrent with these changes was a concerted effort to recruit and retain competent faculty members and a concern with new directions and new goals in general.

*Outcomes and Results* — Although virtually impossible to relate to the selective admissions program, there are several outcomes

and results which may be mentioned. The most immediate result of the selective admissions program was a drastic reduction in freshmen enrollment. Whereas the college had previously admitted around 1,000 beginning students each fall (many of which were adult or special students and not included in Table 1.) the first year of selective admissions netted only 254 students. Other results or outcomes not so immediate was an increase in the holding power of students and an increase in the number of baccalaureate degrees awarded by the college.

Contrary to expectations, the selective admissions program did not produce a change in grading patterns. This is best illustrated by the fact that prior to selective admissions 54 percent of the entering freshmen failed to make a "C" average during their first quarter of enrollment. In the first year of selective admissions, 52 percent of the entering freshmen failed to make a "C" average; the second year those failing to make a "C" average had been reduced to 33 percent, but this percent was not reduced the following year, and four years after selective admissions it had risen back to 37 percent. In the meantime, the percent of first quarter freshmen making an average of "A" had remained constant at two or three percent, the same as before selective admissions.

*Faculty Opinions and Attitudes* — The receptivity of the faculty to the selective admissions program was, for the most part, positive. Many faculty members believed strongly in the advisability of selective admissions and responded enthusiastically to the new policies. Some faculty members, however, were aware that the changing role of the college left a void in the areas of adult or community education and in certain areas of short-term vocational training; these faculty members thought that the college should continue to serve these community needs as well as to elevate its academic standards for degree-seeking students. The fact that a fairly large number of faculty members were paid an honorarium for interviewing students may have made the admissions program more palatable to some faculty members. In any event, there was

considerable belief on the part of the faculty that they were actively involved in the admissions program.

*Student Perceptions* — Throughout the experience of institutional change, no effort was made to determine how students perceived the changes and whether they thought them for better or worse. Students who were admitted no doubt felt more charitable toward the admissions process they had undergone, but the impression of at least one faculty member is that most students met the changes in institutional characteristics much as they endured the admissions process — with quiet resignation. Six years after the establishment of selective admissions, the responses of a group of student leaders on the *College Characteristics Index* indicated that the student leaders perceived the college as slightly more oriented to vocational preparation than to academic achievement.

*The Public Image* — One of the most significant outcomes accompanying the selective admissions program was the noticeable change in the institution's reputation within the city. Whereas previously the college had been known as "a last resort", it now became known as a college that was "very difficult to get into." Fortunately for the college, the public made the *non sequitur* of concluding that it must be a good college. For two or more years the college went into journalistic eclipse as far as the local newspapers were concerned. As memory blurred the abruptness of the new admissions policies and better evidence came to the foreground that the college had, indeed, succeeded in its efforts to change its role and its image, the college began to receive better coverage in the newspapers.

## Evaluation and Conclusions

There can be no doubt that within a ten-year period this college succeeded in changing radically both its role and its image. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that selective admissions was the major factor involved. It must be remembered that academic standards at the institution had been rising for a least

ten years prior to the establishment of selective admissions, and the the college had been making continuous, even if somewhat uneven, progress since World War II. The location of the college in the midst of a thriving metropolitan area suggests a certain amount of inevitability about its growth and development. The changing demands being placed upon higher education in general also made the changing role of the institution, to some extent, inevitable.

This is not to contend that the selective admissions program was without influence in changing institutional characteristics. It did make the student body younger by eliminating adult education courses and by relying so heavily upon tests which give the young high school graduate a certain advantage. It did, at least indirectly, contribute to the institution's public image by impressing upon applicants that their admission to the college could no longer be taken for granted.

Yet, there is good reason to believe that the selective admissions program at this particular college was, to a large extent, a vestibule operation which was little related to far more potent forces at work within the college and within the community it served. The expansion of curricular offerings in arts and sciences, and a general broadening of scope of all the institution's academic programs would seem to be potent forces in attracting better prepared students to the college. Expanded course offerings and better prepared students, in turn, attracted more students who would not have previously attended the institution and provided the impetus for further expansion of course offerings. Thus, it would seem that a "virtuous circle" was established which was, in no direct way, dependent upon selective admissions. It would appear, therefore, that only the admissions program was a rapid innovation. The changes in institutional characteristics accompanying selective admissions were quite gradual; these changes had begun before selective admissions and required almost ten years to actually effectuate.

**The primary contention of this paper, therefore, is that selective admissions alone is not the solution to the problems confronting higher education. For some institutions selective admissions may produce dramatic changes in average test scores of entering students but for most public institutions, selective admissions is a necessity only and not a virtue. Its effectiveness must be judged in terms of educational values and purpose—not in terms of predictive efficiency. In short, admissions policies must be coordinated with an institution's academic policies. Being the necessity that it is, let us take care in selective admissions that we select students for the right purposes and in the right way.**

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